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SUBJECT: PPP ANNOUNCES BENAZIR'S RETURN ON OCTOBER 18

Classified By: Anne W. Patterson, Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (U) At a press conference September 14, Pakistan People's Party (PPP) President Makhdoom Amin Fahim announced that Party Chairman Benazir Bhutto would return to Pakistan on October 18, three days after the window for presidential elections closes. Fahim announced that on October 18, Bhutto will land in Karachi and immediately visit Mohammed Ali Jinnah's grave. (Note: Jinnah is the founder of Pakistan and is referred to as Qaid-e-Azam -- "the great leader." End Note.)

12. (U) Bhutto has lived in self-imposed exile in London and Dubai since 1999. She faces corruption charges in Pakistan and abroad from her two previous terms as Prime Minister (1988-90, 1993-96). Information Secretary Tariq Azim said prior to the press conference that -- unlike the treatment former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif received earlier this week -- Bhutto would not be deported on arrival.

14. (SBU) According to a recent International Republican Institute poll (to be released publicly next week), public support for President Musharraf and his proposed alliance with Bhutto has been dropping. Some officials in both the Pakistan Muslim League and the People's Party continue to question the political wisdom of this alliance, but the PPP will be celebrating Bhutto's return. "Deal or no deal, our leader is coming home" said one PPP official.

15. (C) Comment: By carefully choosing a return date that will not interfere with Musharraf's re-election plans, Bhutto is leaving the door open to continued negotiations on their alliance. The decision to announce her return on the first day of Ramadan and Bhutto's plan to immediately visit Qaid-e-Azam's grave are deliberately targeted to appeal to a broader segment of the population than just PPP's moderate, secular base. With Nawaz Sharif marginalized in exile, Bhutto clearly sees and wants to exploit an opportunity to increase PPP's share of votes in the upcoming parliamentary elections. End Comment.
PATTERSON